DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 436 535 TM 027 592

TITLE	Learning Climate in Schools: Part I. Views of Disruptive and Violent Behavior in Middle and High Schools. Evaluation Brief.
INSTITUTION	North Carolina State Dept. of Public Instruction, Raleigh. Div. of Accountability Services/Research.
PUB DATE	1996-09-00
NOTE	8p.; For Part II, see TM 027 593.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Evaluative (142)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Behavior Problems; *Educational Environment; High Risk Students; *High Schools; Middle School Teachers; *Middle Schools; *School Safety; Secondary School Teachers; *Teacher Attitudes; Violence
IDENTIFIERS	North Carolina End of Course Testing Program; North Carolina End of Grade Testing Program

ABSTRACT

This evaluation brief examines several sources of data to show the areas and grade levels in which interventions related to at-risk behavior in public schools are most needed. The evaluation was part of an ongoing look at alternative learning programs in North Carolina. The sources of data include North Carolina's annual report on school violence for 1994-95, selected data from the 1995 North Carolina "Youth Risk Behavior Survey," and portions of the 1995 teacher end-of-grade and end-of-course surveys. Data show that teacher and administrator reports of increased school violence are consistent, and that violent and disruptive behaviors are more prevalent in middle school grades. The use of drugs and violent incidents with higher stakes are more prevalent in the high school grades. It also appears that incidents of several types of disruptive and violent behavior reported by students are higher than incidents known or reported by school officials. It is theorized that middle school violence may be higher because middle school students are in a developmental phase that results in higher levels of acting out, testing limits, and participating in relatively "low-stakes" incidents. It may also be that disruptive students drop out before they get to high school, or that middle school personnel have higher expectations and less tolerance of disruptive behaviors than high school teachers do. (SLD)

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Evaluation brief

September, 1996

Learning Climate in Schools: Part I

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E brief

Public Schools of North Carolina . State Board of Education . Jay Robinson, Chairman
Department of Public Instruction . Bob Etheridge, State Superintendent

September, 1996

Learning Climate in Schools: Part I

Views of Disruptive and Violent Behavior in Middle and High Schools

Considerable attention has been given to bolstering safe schools and reducing disruptive behavior in schools. On February 1, 1996 the State Board of Education endorsed a "Pledge to Protect: A Plan for Safe Schools." In 1994-95, $12 million was allocated to local education agencies for a variety of Intervention/Prevention (I/P) Grant Programs. Another $3 million was allocated in 1995 specifically for alternative learning programs (ALPs), which are thought to offer one way to address the problems of disruptive and violent students. Additional funds were provided for ALPs in the 1996 legislative session.

The growth of programs to serve academically and especially behaviorally at-risk students has been rapid. Ninety-nine programs were funded in 1995 through the I/P Grants. Twenty-one (21) were categorized as "Safe School" projects that affected all students in a school, including activities such as conflict resolution curricula, peer mediation programs, hiring of security officers, and the like. Seventy-eight (78) programs were designated as "Selected Student" programs, meaning that they identified and served some category of at-risk students. A telephone survey conducted as part of the 1995-96 ALP Evaluation yielded some 300 programs designed to serve approximately 24,000 at-risk students. The continuing evaluation of ALPs focuses more specifically on core academic programs that serve disruptive and academically at-risk students.

Purpose

Considerable focus has been placed on violent and disruptive students, and rapid growth of ALPs has resulted. This ***Evaluation Brief*** examines several sources of data to show the most needed areas of and grades levels for intervention of at-risk behavior in public schools.

Sources of Data

Three sources of information are used:

1. The Annual Report on School Violence, 1994-95 summarizes administrative reports of incidents for designated types of violence in schools in North Carolina. While these data may be subject to some inconsistencies in reporting, they are the best estimates currently available of actual crimes in public schools.

2. Selected data from the 1995 North Carolina Youth Risk Behavior Survey on violence and use of illegal substances provides students' self-report of at-risk behaviors.

3. One item on the 1995 End-of-Grade and End-of-Course teacher header sheets provides information on teacher views about disruptive/violent behavior in schools.

Thus, these sources provide views of disruptive behavior and/or violence in schools from the vantage points of the three major participants in schools – administrators, teachers, and students.

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Middle School: Higher Rate of Problems

The 1995 Annual Report on School Violence shows that similar numbers of *overall* incidents were reported for both middle and high schools: 3221 and 3303 respectively.

- **Incidents Reported by Principals**

However, the reported incidents for several categories of violence were *notably higher for middle school grades*. A higher number of incidents might be expected for high schools since there are more students attending high schools than middle schools [290,632 in high school and 258,045 in middle school (1994)]. A more precise way to look at comparative incidence is to calculate the rate per 1,000 students for both levels of schooling. Table 1 shows actual numbers of reported incidents and the rate per 1,000 students. Both measures suggest special concern for middle school students.

Table 1. 1995 Annual Violence Report Categories Showing More Incidents for Middle School Students

Type of Incident	Total Incidents Reported		Rate Per Thousand Students	
	Middle Schools	High Schools	Middle Schools	High Schools
Possession of Weapon	1141	861	4.40	3.07
Assault on School Employee	388	299	1.50	1.07
Robbery	200	93	.77	.33
Sexual Assault	187	78	.72	.28
Sexual Offense	117	37	.45	.13

- **Teacher Perceptions Consistent with Official Reports**

On the teacher header sheet item, a higher percentage of middle school than high school teachers indicated certain behaviors to be problems. For example, middle school teachers noted verbal and physical assaults as more problematic than high school teachers did. The same pattern was seen for robbery or theft.

Table 2. Percent of Teachers Indicating A Problem by Grade Levels

Type of Behavior	6th Grade	7th Grade	8th Grade	High School
Students assaulting other students	21.2	22.2	22.4	10.7
Students verbally assaulting faculty	28.7	32.3	33.7	23.7
Students physically assaulting faculty	4.2	4.4	4.4	3.0
Robbery/Theft	12.5	12.4	13.1	10.2
Possession of weapons	3.9	5.0	5.4	4.5

Thus, teacher perceptions of the incidence and severity of these specific incidents are consistent with administrative reports of similar incidents.

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Compared to high school teachers, middle school teachers – especially 7th and 8th grade – also perceived a greater level of problems associated with disorderly conduct, vandalism, racial prejudice, and joining gangs.

Table 3. Percent of Teachers Indicating a Problem by Grade Levels

Type of Behavior	6th Grade	7th Grade	8th Grade	High School
Disorderly Conduct	57.1	58.3	57.8	40.4
Vandalism	15.9	18.5	21.2	16.4
Racial Prejudice	12.5	15.4	17.6	11.5
Joining Gangs	3.6	5.9	5.8	3.2

High School: Drugs/Violent Assault

Use of drugs and tendencies toward more violent assault appear to be worse in the high schools than in the middle school grades.

• Use of Illegal Substances

The only category on the teacher header sheet questions that *high school teachers* rated as more highly problematic than middle school teachers was "Distribution or Use of Drugs." In fact, percentages increase substantially with each middle school grade through high school.

Table 4. Percent of Teachers Indicating Drugs as a Problem by Grade Level

6th Grade	7th Grade	8th Grade	High School
4.5%	9.3%	13.7%	18.7%

Again, this perception is validated by the reported number of incidents of "possession of illegal substances" in the 1995 Annual Report on School Violence: 1352 in high school and 798 in middle school.

The 1995 Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) provides additional information on the use of illegal substances. When asked if they had ever smoked marijuana or drunk alcohol for other than religious reasons, the percentage of students answering "Yes" was higher in high school grades.

Table 5. Percent of Students by Grade Level Trying Alcohol and Marijuana

Behavior	Grade Levels						
	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Ever drank alcohol?	42.5	59.9	69.6	60.2	71.5	72.1	75.1
Ever smoked marijuana?	6.4	15.3	25.9	31.5	38.7	36.5	39.9

Nevertheless, students' self-reported use of alcohol at least once is alarmingly high, even in the earlier middle grades. Further, one-fourth of the eighth graders reported trying marijuana at least once and increased to nearly 40% by twelfth grade.

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• Violent Assault & Possession of Firearms

Other than possession of illegal substances, the only criminal incidents found more frequently in high schools than in middle schools pertained to possession of firearms and more violent assault. Table 6 shows the total reported incidents and the rate per thousand students (both higher for high school) in these categories from the 1995 Annual Report on School Violence.

Table 6. 1995 Annual Violence Report Categories Showing More Incidents for High School Students

Type of Incident	Total Incidents Reported		Rate Per Thousand Students	
	Middle Schools	High Schools	Middle Schools	High Schools
Assault with injury	202	309	.78	1.10
Possession of firearm	110	144	.42	.51
Assault with weapon	73	120	.28	.43

While there are no similar YRBS data for middle schools, high school students (grades 9-12) on the 1995 YRBS reported that they participated in activities related to violence at the following rates:

- Had carried a weapon in the previous 30 days 22.4%
- Had carried a gun in the previous 30 days 7.9%
- Had carried a weapon on school property in the previous 30 days 9.4%
- Had been threatened/injured with a weapon at school in last 12 months 8.0%

These data show that student reports of such occurrences are higher than those of school officials. For example, administrators reported 861 incidents of "possession of a weapon" in high schools during the 1994-95 school year. The percentage of students who reported on the YRBS that they carried a weapon "in the past 30 days" translates to 27,319 students. While many students may be carrying only pocket knives, the likely incidence of possession of weapons appears to be far higher than the incidence actually detected and/or reported.

Summary and Possible Reasons

The three sources of data examined in this **Brief** provide evidence for the types of problems in schools and the grade levels in which problems exist.

- Teacher perceptions are consistent with the trends for administrator reports of violence.
- Based on administrator reports and teacher perceptions, many violent/disruptive behaviors seem to be more prevalent at middle school grades.
- Use of drugs and incidents of violent acts with higher stakes are more prevalent at the high school grades.
- Students' reported incidences of several types of disruptive and violent behavior are likely higher than the incidence known and/or reported by school officials.

Possible hypotheses for the apparently higher incidences in middle schools are:

- Middle school students are in a developmental phase that may lead to higher rates of acting out, "testing limits," and participation in "lower stakes" incidents (e.g., assaults not accompanied by weapons or serious injury).
- Middle school personnel may not be as tolerant of violence and crimes or may hold higher expectations for disciplined student behavior than do high school staff.
- The lower perceived and reported rates at the high school level may mean that disruptive and violent middle school students drop out of school before they get to high school.

A Beginning Framework for Safe Schools Planning

The North Carolina Department of Public Instruction's Instructional Support/Safe Schools Team in the Division of School Improvement Services is developing a framework for safe-schools planning. Several strategies and ideas for ensuring safe schools are listed below. This framework is the beginning of a more detailed manual that will be forthcoming from this Team. Safe schools are both a condition and an outcome of effective schools. Having an orderly, disciplined and safe school requires a comprehensive approach that encompasses the physical environment and social and academic climate of the school.

Definition of Safe Schools

A safe school is a school:

(1) Where identified or specified problems or incidents of disruption, crime and violence are progressively decreased;

(2) Which is perceived to be orderly, disciplined and safe by at least 95 percent of major stakeholders (i.e., students, educators, parents) and where at least 95 percent of occupants feel safe and secure at any time;

(3) Where the occurrence of absences, inadequate academic performance, or dropouts due to feeling afraid in school is progressively decreased; and

(4) Where those factors thought to contribute to accomplishing these outcomes are progressively developed and nurtured.

Standards for Safe Schools

Physical Environment Standards

Grounds and Buildings: Safe schools have...
- Well-maintained facilities, grounds, and perimeters
- Controlled access to the general property and each facility
- Signs that control access and direct visitors and school occupants
- Well-lighted and sighted accesses and traffic areas

Surveillance Support: Safe schools have...
- Necessary built-in security/detection devices
- Staff prepared to monitor security devices and to respond to alarms or detection of security threats
- An adequate cadre of trained staff and/or volunteers to patrol school property
- Essential communication technology for various users to support the monitoring and management of security

Policies and Procedures: Safe schools have...
- Policies that guide, direct and limit access to and movement about school property
- Policies and procedures that guide responses to security violations

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Social/Cultural Environment Standards

Expectations and Values: Safe schools have...
- Clearly stated and written expectations of behavior and conduct for all school participants
- Clearly stated and written consequences for inappropriate behavior and conduct for all school participants
- Established procedures for fair and consistent enforcement of policies and personnel prepared to implement such procedures

School Climate: Safe and effective schools...
- Operate on the basis of "Total Quality" concepts (i.e., meaningful involvement of *all* stakeholders)
- Promote mutual respect, acceptance and affiliation among all stakeholders
- Create an environment that is free of threats and intimidation and is welcoming and inviting

Academic and Special Program Standards

Curriculum and Instruction: Safe and effective schools have...
- Instruction that is tailored to student needs and interests
- Curriculum goals, integrated curriculum, and instructional methods and programs that promote character education; effective social skills; problem solving and decision making; conflict resolution and anger management; and good citizenship

Alternative Education: Safe and effective schools have alternative learning programs that...
- Are effectively connected with the regular education and other external programs to and from which students can transition
- Reflect the curriculum and instruction standards identified for all schools

Extracurricular Programs: Safe and effective schools have programs that...
- Appeal to and involve all segments of the student body
- Extend and support the school's "Social/Cultural Environment Standards"

Parent and Community Involvement

Parental Support and Involvement: Safe and effective schools have...
- Effective communication between parents and educators
- Parents who participate in their child's school and his/her overall performance (e.g., academic and conduct)
- Shared responsibility between parents and the school for students' safety and positive involvement in school
- Effective educational programs for parents to support the above

Community Support and Involvement: Safe and effective schools...
- Establish lines of communication with all relevant community agencies/organizations (e.g., law enforcement, mental health, social services, public health and juvenile justice)
- Establish recreation and quality supervised care options within the community (such as YMCA, Municipal Recreation Centers, Boys and Girls Club) where children and youth can spend out-of-school hours in supervision and safety
- Access essential data bases and information on the health and welfare of the community that can be used to identify critical needs and plan related programs and interventions
- Participate and cooperate with relevant community agents toward collaborative strategic planning and policy and program development